

# **An Analysis of the Use of Modal Verbs in EFL Textbooks in Terms of Politeness Strategy of English**

Yukako NOZAWA

## **Introduction**

English is now used as an international language in the world (Jenkins, 2003). In Japan, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) recently adopted the idea of English as an international language to curriculum guidelines, which is particularly designed to enhance productive skills of students such as speaking and writing (Curriculum guidelines, MEXT, 2010). However, researchers have often reported that Japanese learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) still have some difficulty in employing pragmatic strategies, which are important aspects of productive skills in English (Shigemitsu, Murata & Tsuda, 2006; Taguchi, 2008). They also revealed that the learners specifically found difficulty in using polite expressions in English and that little has been taught in the classroom. This is despite the fact that they practise more complicated politeness strategies in their L1, considering the factors such as age and familiarity of interlocutors. According to Shigemitsu et al. (2006), there seems to be a false anticipation among Japanese EFL learners that native speakers of English make a request in a more direct way, although the latter frequently use polite linguistic forms. This paper therefore examines how these linguistic items ensuring politeness, which are particularly used when people make a request, are taught in EFL textbooks and discuss how they can be adopted and introduced to Japanese EFL learners.

In the following sections, firstly, I conceptualise politeness as a pragmatic function and present polite linguistic items which are focused in this analysis. Secondly, the procedure of text analysis will be outlined and the results will be

presented. Lastly, the results of text analysis will be discussed and the implications will be suggested for teaching politeness to EFL learners and introducing politeness strategies to English teaching in Japan.

### **Politeness and polite linguistic forms**

Politeness strategies have been developed through conceptualising pragmatic competence of language (Cutting, 2008). Pragmatic competence refers to communicating “meaning in a socially appropriate manner” depending on context (Taguchi, 2008, p. 424; Thomas, 1995). According to Austin (1975), people generally produce an utterance, which consists of grammatical structures and words, for performing certain actions such as apology, request, and complaining. This is the central notion in what is called speech act theory and is seen as successfully introducing the concept that language use is a social action, but it does not explain how interlocutors achieve successful communication in interaction (Culpeper & Shauer, 2009; Yule, 1996).

This discrepancy was complimented by Grice (1989), who stated that mostly there is an assumption that people are cooperative in conversation. He called this ‘cooperative principle’ and proposed that there are four maxims for contributing to cooperative communication. He indicates that the speakers pay attention to avoid flouting these four maxims constituting this principle: maxims of Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner (Cutting, 2008; Grice, 1989; Yule, 1996). This means that the speakers are expected to give proper amounts of true, relevant information which avoids obscure or ambiguous expressions and statements that lack adequate evidence, in brief and orderly talk (Cutting, 2008; Grice, 1989). However, as Grice himself mentions, people often flout these maxims, regarding the effect of power relations between interlocutors. Leech (1983) points out the importance of context, and indicates that it is necessary to consider a “specific, ‘local’ condition” as well as a “general condition” of the use of the language (Leech, 1983, pp. 10–11). He explains that the cooperative principle is operated differently according to various social situations of the interlocutors, and has proposed the politeness

principle and six maxims regarding these situations. However, some of his six maxims are seen as culturally specific and his politeness principle cannot always be applied to all languages and cultures (Thomas, 1995).

The universal feature of politeness was more successfully outlined by Brown and Levinson (1978) [1987]. According to their theory, people need to acknowledge and to be aware of ‘face,’ which is conceived as the public image of self, and thus they endeavour to conserve this self-image by showing respect and avoiding face-threatening act (FTA), the weightiness of which is determined by distance, power difference, and the ranking of speaker and hearer (Brown & Levinson, 1978; Cutting, 2008). There are two aspects of politeness regarding two types of faces. One is positive politeness strategy; the other is negative politeness strategy. The former concerns appealing to positive face, that is, the need to be accepted as a member of a group. Positive face is saved by showing solidarity or claiming that the interlocutors have common ground. On the other hand, negative politeness strategy is concerned with negative face wants of others, that is, the need to have the right not to be imposed upon or presumed. It is practised by demonstrating distance from the other, or avoiding invading personal territory of each other (Cutting, 2008; Thomas, 1995; Yule, 1996). This study focuses on this negative politeness strategy that embraces polite request forms and the use of linguistic forms which are used to avoid FTA (Brown & Levinson, 1978).

Polite request forms regarding negative politeness strategy can be enacted by using modal verbs and formulaic syntactic structures that can mitigate directness of speech and sound more polite, such as *will you~?*, *can you~?*, *would you~?*, and *could you~?*. The function of these linguistic forms is called hedging, which softens the force of expressions regarding power relations between interlocutors (Cutting, 2012; Salager-Meyer, 1994, pp. 149–150). The linguistic forms are labelled as modals of hedges or hedging devices (Brown & Levinson, 1978; Cutting, 2012; Murphy, 2010). This paper will look at to what extent these modal verbs — *may*, *might*, *can*, *could*, *would*, *will* (in question form *will you~?*), and their syntactic structures are presented and how they are

taught in EFL textbooks.

### **Research Questions**

As indicated in the previous section, this study focuses on the use of modal forms for polite requests in EFL textbooks by asking the following two research questions:

- 1) To what extent do polite request modal verbs appear in textbooks?
- 2) How are they taught in the textbooks?

Research Question 2 is answered by the following two sub-questions.

- 1. Are there any lessons in the textbooks which focus on politeness of the language?
- 2. Are there any variations in how the polite forms are presented according to the target readers' proficiency levels?

### **Methodology**

Two textbooks (*English in Mind Student's book 4* and *Message 3*, both published by Cambridge University Press) were analysed. *English in Mind* is designed for upper-intermediate teenage learners of English, while *Message 3* is designed for lower-secondary learners of English, aiming at taking students to an intermediate level. Neither of them is especially designed for conversation textbooks.

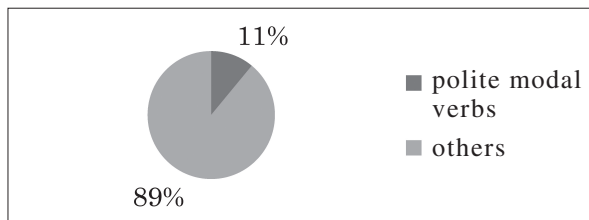
The analysis only focuses on polite request questioning forms and modal-verb structures followed by adjectives which are related to politeness, such as *I'd be grateful if you could~*, as they are unmistakably classified as polite hedges (Murphy, 2010). Controversial items which could be counted as 'guessing' function were excluded in this study in order to avoid misidentifying target items and ensure the accuracy of labelling items.

In addition, this research adopts a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods. For answering research question 1, with a quantitative data analysis

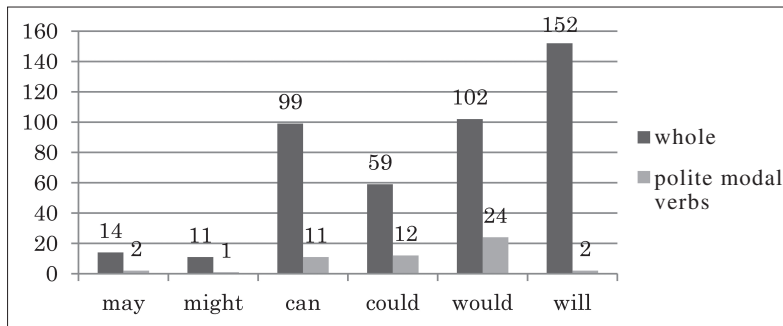
framework, I looked through the number of modal verbs throughout the text and picked up the items which are presented as modal forms for polite request, and then calculated the proportion of polite items in the whole modal verbs. For answering research question 2, (sub-questions 2-1 and 2-2), it was examined if there are any particular lessons for polite forms and any variations in how the polite forms are presented according to different proficiency levels of the textbooks with a qualitative data analysis framework.

### Results

With respect to research question 1, Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the results of numerical analysis of polite forms in EFL textbooks.



**Figure 1. The percentage of politeness in all modal verbs**



**Figure 2. Types of modal verbs**

Figure 1 shows the percentage of modal verbs which are related to politeness in all modal verbs that appeared in both textbooks. As can be seen, 11% of all

the modal verbs are used in the context of politeness. Figure 2 gives a more detailed account for each of the modal verbs and their respective appearances in politeness contexts. The black bar chart and the lighter one represent the number of each item and the number of modal verbs which are related to politeness, respectively. As this data demonstrates, the proportion of the polite modal items is relatively small in all the modal verbs. Even though the appearance of *can*, *would*, *will* represents a relatively larger number than that of *may*, *might* as a whole, neither of the polite items denotes large numbers in their polite functions.

Regarding research question 2, the textbooks were analysed with respect to two issues (sub-questions 2-1 and 2-2): whether there is a lesson (or lessons) on politeness or not, and the variation in the appearance of the target items according to different proficiency levels. Firstly, in *Message 3*, which is designed for lower-proficiency learners, there was only one lesson explicitly dedicated to teaching polite request forms, while there were no lessons about polite expressions in *English in Mind Student's book 4*. Therefore, there seems to be a variation in how the polite forms are presented depending on the proficiency levels of the assumed readers/learners. In *English Mind Student's book 4*, polite request items appeared sparsely across lessons throughout the textbooks, and some of these items appeared as tasks without explicitly indicating learners that they are learning polite request forms. As *English in Mind* has six-level courses (*Student's book 1* to *6*), polite forms might have been dealt with in the courses for lower-proficiency learners. It is possible to presume that textbooks for lower-proficiency learners present polite forms in a more explicit way such as dedicating a lesson to them, while upper-intermediate textbooks require learners to apply the rules to various topics and contexts without explicit explanation, although this has to be proved with more data.

### **Discussions and implications for teaching and further research**

Through the textbook analysis, the following two major findings are drawn. (1) The number of the polite request forms was 11% of all the modal verbs in the

two EFL textbooks. (2) The only one lesson explicitly dealing with polite request forms was found in *Message 3*, the textbook for lower-proficiency learners. This section argues these results of the analysed textbooks in terms of acquiring pragmatic strategies, discussing if and how teaching politeness in these EFL textbooks is applicable to EFL teaching in Japan.

Firstly, it is presumed that the number of modal forms for polite requests is not sufficient for Japanese learners of English if these two textbooks were adopted as EFL textbooks in Japan, as one of the major factors that enables successful L1-L2 pragmatic transfer is said to be the amount of exposure and learning environment (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999; Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998; Taguchi, 2008). Generally, Japanese EFL students learn English and its pragmatic function in class with Japanese peers in a monolingual situation, while ESL learners use or encounter it both in the classroom and actual communication. Researchers agree that the degree of awareness for pragmatic functions of English is more pronounced in ESL learners and their improvement in comprehension is faster than that of EFL learners (Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998; Taguchi, 2008). It is also pointed out that the difference in EFL and ESL classrooms is in the types of pragmatic items presented and the contexts, as well as the amount of authentic exposure. Therefore, it is suggested that the textbooks need to include more authentic polite request forms.

Secondly, regarding the authenticity, another problem arises when introducing these two EFL textbooks to Japanese learners of English. In these textbooks, the power relations among interlocutors are relatively small even in communication between teachers and students, compared to those in Japan that form more rigid and complicated power relations. Considering these differences, it might be difficult for Japanese EFL students to reflect the examples of these textbooks on their own communication. It is suggested that teachers and teaching materials should provide learners with more opportunities to get cultural access so that they can draw their attention to the difference in pragmatic strategies between L1 and L2 (Taguchi, 2008; Mumford, 2009; Timmis, 2005). It is also recommended that teachers and textbooks should

provide culturally-attuned forms of politeness, considering the current actual use of English as an international language (Mumford, 2009).

Thirdly, the small amount of explicit instruction of politeness can be related to the fact that there is a clear mismatch between high grammatical competence and low pragmatic competence or even awareness of EFL learners (Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998). It is also important for teachers to present the polite forms clearly and explicitly to the learners.

The limitation of the current research is the narrowly-defined polite expressions and the limited number of textbooks examined. As the number of the examples of polite forms in these textbooks is small, it is not appropriate to generalise the results and find the tendency of EFL textbooks. Additionally, although the analysis of this paper excluded other forms of polite expressions due to the blurred distinction with 'guessing' forms, it is possible that there could be more polite forms in English according to different contexts. It is also suggested that the researcher should achieve a clearer definition of polite forms and broaden the target items to be included in research. Another limitation due to the availability of textbooks is that as neither of the textbooks is designed for enhancing speaking skills of Japanese EFL students specifically, it was impossible to find and analyse the tasks for speaking skills, and the problems of teaching materials for Japanese learners in actual teaching contexts. Further research requires the analysis of Japanese EFL learners' textbooks.

### **Conclusion**

Through the textbook analysis in this paper, it was revealed that the proportion of polite request forms in the two EFL textbooks is 11%, and thus not necessarily sufficient for learners to achieve high pragmatic competence by using them. Moreover, some parts of the context of teaching materials are different from those of Japanese learners in L1 communication, and thus they might not successfully enhance learners' pragmatic development. Although these results need to be considered in the context that the two textbooks are not specifically designed for improving speaking skills of Japanese EFL learners, it



would be desirable that teachers provide EFL learners with more practical teaching materials and methods concerning learners' successful communication in English.

## References

- Austin, J. (1975). *How to Do Things with Words*. (2nd ed.). Clarendon Press.
- Bardovi-Harlig, K. (1999). Exploring the interlanguage of interlanguage pragmatics: A research agenda for acquisitional pragmatics. *Language Learning*, 49(4), 677–713.
- Bardovi-Harlig, K. & Dörnyei, Z. (1998). Do language learners recognize pragmatic violations? Pragmatic versus grammatical awareness in instructed L2 learning. *TESOL Quarterly*, 32(2), 233–262.
- Brown, P. & Levinson, S. (1978) [1987]. *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Culpeper, J. & Schauer, G. (2009). Pragmatics. In Culpeper, J., Katamba, F., Kerswill, P., Wadok, R., & McEnery, T (Eds.) *English language: description, variation and context*: Chapter 11 (pp.202–220). UK: Palgrave/Macmillan.
- Cutting, J. (2008). *Pragmatics and Discourse*. London: Routledge.
- Cutting, J. (2012). Vague language in conference abstracts. *Journal of English for Academic Purpose*, 11, 283–293.
- Grice, H. P. (1989). *Studies in the way of words*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Jenkins, J. (2003). *World Englishes*. A resource book for students. London: Routledge.
- Leech, G. (1983). *Principles of pragmatics*. NY: Longman.
- Mumford, S. (2009). An analysis of spoken grammar. the case for production. *ELT Journal*, 63(2), 137–144.
- Murphy, B. (2010). *Corpus and sociolinguistics: Investigating age and gender in female talk*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins B. V.
- Salager-Meyer, F. (1994). Hedges and textual communicative function in medical English written discourse. *English for Specific Purposes*, 13(2), 149–170.

- Shigemitsu, Y., Murata, Y., & Tsuda, S. (2006) Ibunka Taiken Anketo. In Hori, M., Tsuda, S., Otsuka, Y. Murata, Y., Shigemitsu, Y., Oya, M., & Murata, K. (Eds.) *Poraitonesu to Eigo-kyouiku* [English Education in Japan: Politeness Perspectives]. Japan: Hitsuji Shobo.
- Taguchi, N. (2008). The role of learning environment in the development of pragmatic comprehension: A comparison of gains between EFL and ESL learners. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*. 30. 423–452.
- Thomas, J. (1995). *Meaning in interaction: An introduction to pragmatics*. London: Longman.
- Timmis, I. (2005). Towards a framework for teaching spoken grammar. *ELT Journal*. 59(2), 117–125.
- Yule, G. (1996). *Pragmatics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.